

## Bruce, Blanche K. (1841–1898)

Mississippi. Born a slave. Mulatto. Literate. Planter, teacher, editor.



The first black American to serve a full term in the U.S. Senate, Bruce was born in Farmville, Virginia, the son of a slave mother and, possibly, her owner, a wealthy planter. The youngest of eleven children, he worked as a body servant to his owner's son and was educated by the same private tutor who instructed his young master. In 1850, Bruce was taken to Missouri, where he learned printing and worked on his owner's tobacco farm. He escaped in 1861 to Kansas, where he organized a black school in Lawrence. In 1864 he returned to Missouri, where he established the state's first school for black children. Some sources say he studied at Oberlin College immediately after the Civil War, but the college has no record of his attendance.

After working as a porter on a Mississippi River steamboat, Bruce came to Mississippi in 1868, with seventy-five cents to his name. He was appointed an election official in Tallahatchie County by General Adelbert Ames, and in 1870 he became sergeant at arms for the state Senate. Bruce then moved to Bolivar County, where between 1870 and 1872 he served as sheriff, superintendent of schools, and tax collector, and editor of the *Floreyville Star*. He also held a position on the Mississippi levee board. Bruce turned down Ames's invitation to run for lieutenant governor in 1873 and in the following year was elected by the legislature to the U.S. Senate, serving 1875–81. When James L. Alcorn, the state's senior senator, refused to present Bruce for swearing-in, as was customary, Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York stepped forward to do so. In the Senate, Bruce worked closely with Alcorn's successor, Democrat Lucius Q. C. Lamar, to obtain federal aid for railroads and other projects in Mississippi. He opposed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1878 and headed the committee that investigated the Freedman's Savings Bank after its failure. Bruce opposed the Kansas Exodus movement of 1879.

Bruce remained in Washington, D.C., when his term of office expired. From there, along with James Hill and John R. Lynch, he was part of the black triumvirate that dominated Mississippi Republican politics in the 1880s. Bruce served as register of the U.S. Treasury, 1881–85 and again 1897–98 (a post reserved for a prominent black by the Republican party in the late nineteenth century), and recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia, 1891–93. He was a delegate to every Republican national convention from 1868 through 1896.

A man with "the manners of a Chesterfield" and moderate in Reconstruction politics, Bruce was accepted by Bolivar County's white planters, several of whom put up the \$125,000 bond required for him to take office as sheriff. In 1874, he purchased a one-thousand-acre plantation, and he eventually accumulated a small fortune in Delta lands. In Washington, Bruce formed part of the city's black high society. He operated a successful insurance, loan, and real estate agency and made substantial investments in stocks, bonds, and real estate. During the 1890s, Bruce was a supporter of Booker T. Washington. When he died, in Washington, he was said to be worth over \$100,000.

Bruce's wife, Josephine, whom he married in 1878, had been the first black teacher in Cleveland public schools in the 1850s. After his death, she served as woman principal of Tuskegee Institute and was active in the National Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. His grandson, Roscoe Conkling Bruce, Jr., became the center of a controversy in 1923, when President A. Lawrence Lowell of Harvard University excluded him from residence in the freshman halls. Twenty years earlier, his father, Blanche K. Bruce's son, had attended Harvard and lived in the halls.

William C. Harris, "Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi: Conservative Assimilationist," in *Southern Black Leaders*, ed. Rabinowitz, 3–38. Blanche K. Bruce Papers, Howard University. Melvyn I. Urofsky, "Blanche K. Bruce: United States Senator, 1875–1881," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 29 (1967), 118–41. Frank A. Montgomery, *Reminiscences of a Mississippian in Peace and War* (Cincinnati, 1901), 279. Juanita D. Fletcher, "Against the Consensus: Oberlin College and the Education of American Negroes, 1835–1865" (unpub. diss., American University, 1974), 257. Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880–1920* (Bloomington, Ind., 1990), 325–31. *The Crisis*, June 1923, 72. Logan and Winston, *Dictionary*, 74–76.